

Thinking About It

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that sitting around and reading, that clipping and indexing, that traveling and telephoning. Too often under such pressure, the reporter hypnotizes himself. He begins to believe that the story is there. He ignores or fails to look for evidence that it isn't. He refuses to accept the idea that he has found only pieces that fit. He tiptoes around the big holes in his jigsaw puzzle. "Investigative reporting carries a sterner responsibility [than daily news!]" says James R. Polk. "The reporter is responsible for the truth of every word in that article, that an allegation, a second-hand bit of knowledge is not a fact.... You have to satisfy yourself that the content of what [your source] said is true. It is no excuse to come back later and say, 'My source was mistaken.'"

To guard against these pitfalls, as well as to select and pursue valid stories to their conclusions, requires a disciplined mind. In casual conversation, relatively few experienced professionals describe it that way. They talk about the tedious digging, the loneliness, the blind alleys, the hostility of key interview subjects. Often, when asked how they got to the core of a story, they say something vague about "feeling things just didn't look right." But when the specific steps they undertook on a given story are analyzed, a pattern begins to emerge. What is found is a definite order of activities arranged in such a way that no lead was passed up, no bit of information unevaluated.

The veteran has ingrained within himself a special style of reasoning. He knows how things normally work. If he observes a phenomenon, an effect, he wonders what caused it. He develops a hypothesis and begins checking it against observable facts. He works to back up the chain of facts, searching for information that will either support or negate his hypothesis. He tries different combinations of conflicting versions of a story until he finds the one in which salient points overlap.

Many established investigative reporters have been trained in the law, and some have worked as investigators for congressional committees. Clark Mollenhoff says his legal training causes him to think in terms of evidence and proof. David Burnham was on the staff of the National Commission on Crime and Justice before he joined the *New York Times*. Bob Greene, a former congressional investigator, refers as follows to his Jesuit training: "The Jesuits go in very heavily for Aristotelian and Aquilian logic: syllogistic, deductive, inductive logic, and I find that an ideal way to build an investigation."

"The hardest thing to do in any reporting," Seymour Hersh says, "is not write when you don't have a story." His statement crystallizes the greatest daily pressure on the investigative journalist. His colleagues, his boss, his sources—even he himself—all expect to see some results from all

How It Works

What is this intellectual process? How does it work?

There is no magic formula, but the methods used by the experts do form a pattern, a workable plan, a roadmap along which there are certain

mileposts. The mileposts represent steps along the way against which you can measure your own progress in the intellectual process. These major steps, as shown in the figure on pages 14 and 15 are as follows:

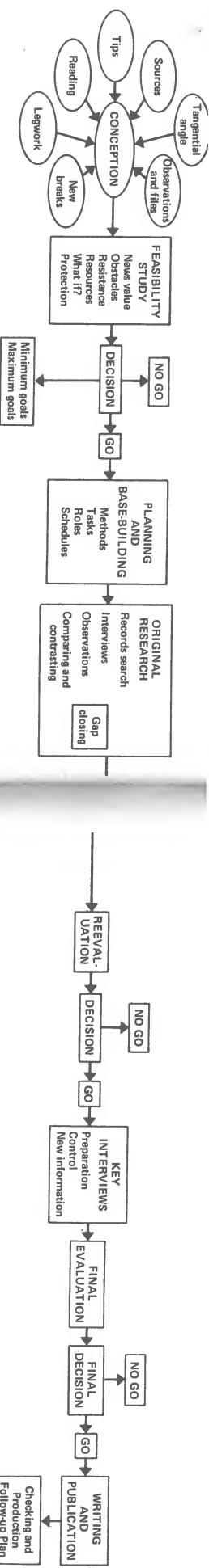
- Conception
- Feasibility study
- Go/no-go decision
- Planning and base-building
- Original research
- Reevaluation
- Go/no-go decision
- Key interviews
- Final evaluation
- Final go/no-go decision
- Writing and publication

Consciously or unconsciously, formally or informally, each of these steps must be taken. At each of several points, options must be evaluated and decisions made about whether—and in what direction—to proceed. Or not proceed.

The crucial area is original research. Think of it as a loop, a circuit that may have to be traveled two, three, four—many—times before you move on to key interviews. It is in this loop that the wise reporter spends most of his productive time. It is here that he carries out Jim Polk's injunction to be “responsible for the truth of every word.”

CONCEPTION

Let's examine each of the steps in this intellectual process beginning with the conception—the germination time—part chance, part calculation. We'll look into tips, sources, reading, news breaks, legwork, tangential angles, and observations and files.



Tips

If you are an established reporter, you get lots of tips. Some are single sentences spoken in a half whisper: “You ought to check the bidding on that furniture contract, friend.” Many are telephoned, with little or no identification. Some come in letters, signed or unsigned.

Never throw away a tip without giving it some screening. It can be the basis for a story. Look for proof of two or three essential facts that might support the tipster’s claim. Usually this means a few quick calls to sources to see if the thesis is plausible. Says Al Delugach: “I just look for somebody in the community who would be in a position to know if the tip is reasonable.” Often the screening of a tip involves a trip to the courthouse, the library, or some other repository of records.

Equally important is evaluation of the tipster, if she or he is known. Is it reasonable to assume that this person knows the facts? Is there any information about the tipster in the morgue? Is the tipster known by other members of the news staff? What ax does this person have to grind? If a story develops as a result of this tip, will the informant personally benefit through job promotion, financial gain, advancement of political interest? Is he or she trying to “get” somebody? An ex-boss? An ex-lover?

Joe Shoquist recalls waiting too long to screen a tip. The lady claimed to have been the girlfriend of a county official and said he was living a double life. The tip came about a week before a *Milwaukee Journal* staffer came back with a report on her that caused Shoquist to say, “We’d better get her in here and talk more to her.” By that time it was too late. She had taken her story to the opposition *Sentinel*, and Shoquist’s staff had the embarrassment of trying to catch up on a fairly sensational story. They eventually did: David Offer followed a trail to Antigua and found that the county official had been there—complete with false mustache and alias—living a Dionysian life.³

One can forgive Shoquist’s caution. The investigator must always be skeptical. When it comes to tipsters, that skepticism must include the operating principle that hardly anybody, ever, provides a tip without an ulterior motive. The motive will likely bias the tipster’s version of whatever is going

on. You do not want to rush into print with a story that can damage a person's reputation. Still, tips, handled carefully, can provide the conception for a story.

Some tipsters are true con artists. A smart one can disarm you completely. If you challenge his shady background, he admits it, enriches it, and then points out it's all the more reason why his story is plausible: "So what if the straight guy claims he never saw me, buddy? You don't expect him to admit it, do you? Of course there's no record of our deal. He didn't want it traced back to him."

Although months had passed, Dave Nimmer was still smarting at the knowledge that he might have been thus conned. Both the *Minneapolis Star* (Nimmer's paper) and the opposition *Tribune* had the same tip. It was from a convict in the state penitentiary. The man claimed he had been part of a burglary ring with several policemen. He seemed to know a lot, and general circumstantial evidence fit what he claimed. Sources said his claim was possible, but there were no records, no physical evidence. Nimmer talked to top police officials, who said they were investigating the same tip. Nimmer waited. Finally convinced the officials were covering up, he published the story. A grand jury was convened—and failed to come up with a single indictment. To this day, Nimmer doesn't know if he had a case or not. He does know that he didn't have proof, and that publishing the story blew away all chances of getting further evidence.

I have had similar frustrations. Early in my career, I got a tip from a worker in a government tool-storage program. Scandalous waste of money, perhaps even illegal diversion of government funds, he claimed. I talked to two of his cronies who supported his story. I went to the people in charge, and they knocked me over with records, unbelievably detailed, proving the impossibility of my tipster's claim. And (though I thought I was protecting my source) they also showed me files on him and his cronies, indicating he was indeed trying to "get" his supervisor. The upshot was mostly personal embarrassment, but it also cost the *Omaha World Herald* several hundred dollars worth of my time.

Sometimes the tipster has no motive but good citizenship. Al Knight remembers a woman who brought the *Rocky Mountain News* a list of license numbers on cars that showed up at odd hours outside the home of a neighbor. She didn't like the man because he had shot an injured dog. Knight and Richard O'Reilly checked the license numbers. They were from several states and their owners had a variety of backgrounds. Eventually, however, the reporters found a pattern and published a story about corruption of a Small Business Administration official by a shady business promoter.

Your final evaluation of a tip should be based on the provability of the allegations it involves, not on the character or motives of the tipster. Even if

your tip doesn't pass your first screening, it is a good idea to file and cross-index it two or three ways: activity, names of persons involved, general subject. Some day, another bit of information may come your way that fills a gap in your fragmentary knowledge—and suddenly a story begins to take shape.

Sources

Sources are not tipsters. Sources are people who are in a position to tell you what is going on. They do not just show up on your doorstep or call you from a phone booth. Sources are acquired, developed, checked, and protected over a period of time.

Every time you make a new contact on a story, you have found a potential source. As you go along, you acquire sources in law-enforcement agencies, in banks, in key government agencies, in the criminal community, in the professional fields (law, medicine, engineering), in public relations, in labor, in politics, in the courts, in education, in science—ideally in every field of human endeavor.

If you do your job professionally, you can even make good sources out of former targets. "We have sent these guys to jail," recounts Bob Greene of *Newsday*. "They come out of jail and we'll go out drinking together." Such people, for instance, may carry grudges against former associates. "They want whoever they're dumping on to do a professional job," Greene explains. "And they know we go after Republicans and Democrats alike. When the Republicans want to dump, they dump to us. When the Democrats want to dump, they dump to us."

An intelligent, discreet, and well-placed source is a help in story conception, an adviser in appraising tips, a guide to valuable research records, and a knowledgeable interpreter of your research. There are cautions, however, about dealing with sources; these are covered in Chapter 4.

Reading

A great deal of information floats by you every day. If you scan it intelligently and analyze it properly, you can do several things:

- Define broad issues
- Learn better techniques
- Get specific story ideas

Most good investigative reporters find time to scan one national newspaper and one other state or regional newspaper every day. Most of them see at least one radical, alternative, or street newspaper regularly (indeed,

they often free-lance pieces for such papers). The thoughtful reporter also reads one or more journalism reviews a month, governmental and trade publications (especially if he or she specializes in a particular field), and local newsletters, bulletins, and trend reports. He reads, at a minimum, several books a year, not only while killing time on or between planes, but while working on stories. The search for issues is general. It becomes a subconscious process of spotting trends and changes in society and of testing ideas for local application.

The search for technique is more specific. If, for instance, you were

reading a paper that used the Knight News Wire in July, 1974, you might

have encountered a fascinating story about how reporters Mike Baxter and

James Savage of the *Miami Herald* traced a scandal in local administration

of the Federal Housing Administration to the doorstep of a United States

senator.⁴ If you read (*More*) in 1973, you would have seen a number of

stories about reporters uncovering the growing scandal in nursing-home

ownership, management, and political influence. If you lived in the Upper

Midwest in 1974, you might have seen the *Des Moines Register* and deduced

how Don Muhm uncovered misallocation of federal disaster-relief funds.⁵

The search for story ideas is unending. Story ideas can come from anywhere—legal advertisements, estate sales, bankruptcy notices, transfers of

business executives, company and professional newsletters. The bulletin of

the local dental society, for example, once provided one of my reporters,

Mick Rood, with a story. He read a one-paragraph item about disciplinary

action being proposed against two dentists. Why? He asked questions,

found some public records, and established that the two had been milking

Medicaid with false billing—and that the local prosecutors were waffling

about whether to file charges. We published the piece, and shortly after-

ward criminal charges were filed and the men pleaded nolo contendere.⁶

News Breaks

This form of story conception derives directly from daily spot journalism. It is simply a matter of reading your own newspaper every day and asking that why question about major news breaks. If the beat reporter who covered the story is too busy to carry on the inquiry—or if he or she does not grasp the possibilities of a really big story—you may do some quick “sourcing” (in your new jargon, “source” is also a verb) and recommend a sort of blitz approach to shake loose the answer.

There are times when you scrap the whole formal process and just start pressing for day-to-day stories that will shake informants and information out of the trees. The *Washington Post* coverage of the Watergate affair is a classic example. Carl Bernstein has reported: “We made sources as we went along. . . . You can see how the stories progressed. . . . Most of the early

stories referred to ‘sources close to the investigation’ Later, you would have seen some stories attributed to personnel of the Committee to Re-elect the President. . . . As we learned more and more, we found more and more people we could go to.”⁷

In a story that put as many pressures on as many people as Watergate did, potentially valuable sources want to be sure you and your paper will believe them, protect them and follow their leads all the way. Publishing hard stories is sometimes the best way to convince them. The news break itself, in other words, can serve as a basis for the conceptualization of a story.

Legwork

It is easy to lock yourself in an office and rely on internal information. The smart reporter, however, makes a point, even while carrying on a major investigation, of moving around, of seeing people outside of the news business. Don Muhm, who is among the most-honored farm editors in the nation, still goes to local hog shows in Iowa. “I’m not so much interested in the damn grand champion hog as I am in the guys who are at the show and what they’ve got to say, what their concerns are,” Muhm explains. “You’ve got to get out.”⁸

Tangential Angle

There are times when, in the middle of one investigation, another story possibility is conceived, something that might be called the tangential angle. It’s a new angle, but one you can’t chase down right away. So you write a memo on it to review at the end of your project.

In 1972, for instance, Ed Pound was investigating a minor political kickback scheme in Chicago’s 43rd Ward. A friend told him about a young man who was being intimidated by John J. (Jack) Clarke, a probation officer. Pound made a note, went back several months later with colleague Tom Dolan to find out who Jack Clarke was. They found that Clarke was more than a probation officer. For special missions, he reported directly to Mayor Richard Daley and to Judge Joseph Power, former law partner of Daley’s. The reporters found Clarke also drew \$1,500 a month as a consultant to the police department, and that he further drew questionable fees as a security consultant to the Port of Chicago. In a series of stories in April of 1973, the *Sun-Times* exposed Clarke’s multiple and mysterious roles. Within eight months Clarke was indicted for income-tax evasion and obstruction of justice, pleaded guilty, and was sent to jail. It was a dramatic payoff to systematic pursuit of a tangential angle.⁹

James B. Steele says that when he and Donald L. Barlett finish a subject, they always have about a half-dozen more ideas they'd like to pursue. When they were working on their series "Oil: the Created Crisis," they came across an IRS audit of major multi-national oil companies in the Middle East. The IRS had apparently assessed the oil companies for half a billion dollars in unpaid taxes.

"We'd read about tax loopholes for years, but the thought occurred to us based on this IRS thing. This isn't a loophole," Steele says.

The results of their investigation into how the IRS annually fails to collect billions, accepts fraudulent returns, and concentrates its efforts in the wrong areas was a seven-part series, "Auditing the IRS."⁹

And Clark Mollenhoff agrees that dozens of tangential leads accompany stories he's working on. "You make a file and observe; otherwise, you forget," he said. "But you remember even those you forgot when something comes up at a later stage."

Observations and Files

Sit and stare at the wall and ask: "What things happen in this town that affect a lot of people but are never written about? What institution—public, educational, nonprofit, corporate—manages to stay out of the news?"

Sometimes a subject emerges clearly. More often, you will decide to start building a file on the basis of conversations with people around the institution. Then, if the initial results confirm your suspicions, you go into the next phase of story development. The Boys Town story (Chapter 9) is an example.

On a different level and in a different metier, but still using observation and files, David Kraslow and Stuart Loory put together a story of misdirected American diplomacy. Their work originally appeared as a series of articles in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1968, then was published as a book, *The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam*. The problem, as Kraslow recounts it, was that the public was getting only the government's version of the efforts to end the war, and there was "reason to believe the public was not being given the whole truth." Their information was that at least one peace initiative "had been sabotaged either deliberately or accidentally," Kraslow recalls, perhaps due to faulty or purposefully blocked communication between military and diplomatic leaders. The reporters' problem was complex: the war was still going on; their prospective sources were scattered around the globe; most of them were contemptuous of every newspaper reporting of international diplomacy. "They think [of daily journalism] as an ephemeral sort of thing, that [the reporter is] not really serious enough to bother with," Kraslow says.

The sources also had problems of conscience. "We argued—and we meant it when we argued—that in light of all that was at stake in the war, of the apparent evidence that the American people were not being told what their government was up to, that a public servant would be serving the higher public interest by cooperating in a responsible examination of the policy," Kraslow adds. "It was really kind of an appeal to patriotism." Before they started interviewing, however, Loory and Kraslow went through a meticulous base-building effort. They hired a full-time researcher to compile a careful chronology of public records on Vietnam diplomacy beginning in 1964: *New York Times* files, clippings from the foreign press, white papers, testimony at congressional hearings. They also pieced together the federal "information grid," the routings of various categories and classifications of information to high-level government officials.

"There were a lot of sources who knew only bits and pieces and didn't have access to other bits and pieces," Kraslow explains. To put together the history of a given incident or peace initiative, the reporters had to know who was on the information grid. They then interviewed people at different levels in order to compare and contrast different versions. As they did so, they began to build credibility with sources who had previously been difficult. "They began to appreciate that they might even learn something from us," Kraslow said, "because we were picking up information that they were not privy to."¹⁰

FEASIBILITY STUDY

Bob Greene calls this stage in the intellectual process "the sniff"—the stage in which a reporter is assigned to sniff out the possibilities and problems surrounding a story idea. Whatever it is called, you should ask yourself: Is it possible to do the story? Is it feasible? Are people, time, money, and technical skill available to pull it together? Will the story literally sit still long enough for our examination? What stands in its way from being fully and accurately told? And the most basic question of all: Does the story mean anything to my reader? At the *Dayton Journal Herald*, Andy Alexander and Keith McKnight call it the WGAD Rule: Who Gives a Damn?

For major projects, your feasibility study should result in a memo written to your editor. This memo should describe the story's potential, your investigative assumptions and problems, the kind of active and possible sources of information you can identify, the leverage and resources you have to get at nonpublic records, and an assessment, if the story pertains to an individual, of your target's ability to resist investigation. Phil

Meyer thinks of feasibility in the terms of a social scientist. How can I measure this phenomenon? Where will evidence of it be visible? What forms of measurement can I use, both direct and indirect?

The feasibility study may consist of a twenty-minute talk with your editor, or it may involve a couple of weeks of intermittent conversations. However it is done, on paper or in conversation, it should cover these points:

News Value

How many readers does it affect? Is the effect clear and direct, or is it abstract and theoretical? Is it something a significant segment of the audience needs to know but can't find out?

Obstacles

Are records available? Will sources talk about the subject? Is there time to do the job properly before, say, the next election or the next session of the legislature or the next meeting of the city planning board? Do you (or your colleagues) know how to interpret the technical material related to the story?

Resistance

Has the county attorney asked (or will he ask) the judge to seal the records? Will the target of the investigative story apply pressure on people not to talk to us? Will he sue?

Resources

How many people are needed to do the investigative-reporting job?

What kinds of skills must they have? Can temporary help be hired to screen 10,000 documents in the court clerk's office? Can the university computer genius help us sample land ownership in the slum area? Can the business editor help with the project for a week? Can you carry the job alone, with only one veteran to help double-team the key interviews?

What If?

The "what if?" phrase, along with its implications, comes from Mel Oplotowsky of the *Riverside (Calif.) Press-Enterprise*, and it should not be forgotten. If you get the story and your paper runs it, what will happen to

Protection

There are two aspects to protecting your story. The first is to preserve security within your own organization in order to prevent knowledge of the investigation from leaking back to the target. Although the general idea will get back to the target soon enough after interviews begin, it is wise to keep details of your findings protected as long as possible. Keep your files or memoranda and documents locked up and discuss the project with others only on a "need to know" basis.

The second aspect of protection is to prepare for the backlash or counterattack from the target. As part of the "what if?" discussion, the editor and reporter should consider ways in which to protect the reporter and the newspaper from public attack. These may include alerting trusted public officials to the nature of the investigation, working with appropriate congressional or legislative oversight committees, or filing a registered letter in a safe-deposit box. If, for example, the reporter needs to adopt a covert role to gather information, such a letter may be sealed before he begins work and opened later in the presence of a public official—such as a trusted judicial officer—if the reporter is unmasked and his motives questioned.

GO/NO-GO DECISION

The upshot of the feasibility study is a decision on whether to proceed with the investigative story. This go/no-go decision is the first of at least three to be made before publication of the story. If you have asked and answered the right questions, the editor will now be able to tell himself either that at least a minimum story can be delivered that the reader gives a damn about—or it can't.

Goals

Encompassed within that decision, of course, is the matter of goals: what the paper hopes to accomplish by publishing the story. Note that I said

the paper? Can it afford to defend the expected lawsuit? Will advertisers pull out? Will readers boycott it? Is this a subject your publisher does not want to go into? You don't like to think of some of these questions, but you are making a mistake if you don't. The publisher may not order you off the story, but he can give you a hard time. You are wise to lay out all these questions at the start, rather than run into them near the end and see months of investigative work go down the drain.

“goals,” plural. The best reporters and editors think in “minimax” terms.

Bob Greene gives a vivid illustration of the necessity to determine goals:

“We received information that the Metropolitan Transit Authority had bought an airport here on Long Island, then leased it out to a fixed-base operator at incredibly advantageous terms to the operator. We got a copy of the contract. On the face of it, it was unbelievable, because there was literally no accounting from the fixed-base operator. You just had to take his word for it. What had been run as a private business at a \$250,000 annual profit, one year after MTA took over, was running \$600,000 in the red. So we said all right, we have a minimum and a maximum here: the minimum is that we can show there’s been a huge waste of taxpayers’ dollars—and that’s a hell of a good story—and the maximum is that we can show that somebody’s been paid off.”

This approach toward determining goals makes life easier at both the start and the finish of an investigative project. If the goal is defined only in terms of finding a payoff scheme, the editor may say no go because the odds against identifying the participants in the scheme are too steep. Or if he says go, he will be disappointed when you come back with proof only of a waste of tax money.

If the goals are clear, the go/no-go decision is far easier to make. If the editor has a good idea what story is there, how it will be gotten, and how much it will cost to get it, and if he believes the newspaper can survive the pressure incurred in putting it together and publishing it, he is most likely to say: “Go.”

If, on the other hand, there are too many unanswered questions about the feasibility of the story, or it is one that the editor feels the reader won’t give a damn about, or is too expensive to get and too uncertain in the getting, the editor is likely to say: “No go.” Even if the answer comes out no, you should be able to satisfy yourself that you’ve given your best. You can close the file—or put it in the “observation” category—and move on to your next idea.

But if the decision is go, you can start planning how to do the job.

PLANNING AND BASE-BUILDING

Tasks

Any investigative story involves planning. It also involves learning and understanding the norms of the subject area under study, what might be termed base-building. Planning pertains to methods, tasks, roles, and schedules.

Methods

Information obtained along the way in pulling together an investigative story must be compiled and organized. Don Barlett and Jim Steele design forms for each project. For their study of criminal justice, for example, they worked out a form designed for the transfer of information to computer-data cards. They usually do a preliminary exercise. They sample a few public records, then design a form of their own and field-test it on a bigger sample before settling on a final form organized in the way they need it.

Maintaining files is also an important method. “Let your files do your investigating for you,” Bob Greene says. Files should be organized so that related information falls naturally into patterns. Editor Greene insists on daily memoranda from each member of his teams. He himself goes through the memos nightly, “breaking” and annotating them. The next morning, the team’s researcher-clerk makes copies and files them. Greene explains the process this way: “Say we’re working on one guy, but this guy Joe Jones—a subordinate or close operator with him—seems to be developing as a major character. Then I will mark on the top of the memo: ‘Start new file on Joe Jones.’ The researcher will start a new file and will also go through every previous memorandum for any mention of Joe Jones. Those memos will be duplicated and copies will go into the Joe Jones file.”

If you don’t have a file clerk, of course, you develop your own method. On all but the simplest projects, you will need some form of cross-index. The standard three-by-five-inch card index can be helpful. The simplest way of all is to tab a file folder on each major character and event, then write cross-references on the outside of each folder.

A chronology is another basic method. It is essential for an understanding of any long or complicated sequence of events. A loose-leaf notebook is a good way in which to organize it. If you are studying a year’s activities, put in 365 blank pages, writing only a date at the top of each one. As you reconstruct activities, write short notes on the pertinent pages.

Tasks are specific activities you will have to perform in connection with any investigative story: records to be checked, persons to be interviewed, data to be put on punch cards and processed, files to be maintained, references to be read. Given some thought, tasks can be tagged with fairly concrete time spans: two days for checking courthouse records, three weeks for

getting a job inside a target organization, one day for a trip to the state-house, one day a week for reviewing files. As best you can, try to estimate the time your tasks will take and pencil them in on a calendar in the order in which they are to be done.

Roles

Assuming that you have help on your story, it is important to fix responsibilities. Who will do what jobs? If one person is particularly familiar with the public records in your target area, he may become responsible for all records search and perhaps for weekly file maintenance. If another has a talent for getting people to talk, he or she may carry the bulk of interviewing. You may organize roles in any of several ways; simply be sure that every task you have identified is covered by someone who knows that is his job.

Schedules

What is the best order in which to do the assigned tasks? If your project involves a public-attitude survey, for instance, there will be at least five steps to it: design, field-testing, data collection, tabulation, and evaluation. Schedule these tests early and delay most of your interviewing until the survey results are in hand. Normally you stay away from the key interviewing subject as long as possible, but there are times when you may want to visit that person early for a soft interview in order to get information that won't be available later. In that case, scheduling is important.

Base-building usually begins during the feasibility study and becomes more formal during the planning stage. Its purpose is to define the historic, legal, statistical, and ethical boundaries of the subject area. The law and history are fairly easy to find in public or academic libraries. Statistics can be compiled from trade literature, government reports, and institutional files. The ethics and accepted practices of a field of endeavor are learned from conversation with experts, from the files of professional and public regulatory agencies, and by inference from reading the trade press.

Peyton Whitley of the *Seattle Times* recalls investigating a questionable insurance agency and finding that it had advanced \$163,000 to finance one of its directors to begin business as a general agent for the company. The transaction was listed in a state-required report and meant little to Whitley until he discussed it with an expert source. "An advance of \$163,000? Unheard of," declared the source. This discovery of self-dealing became a basic reference point for Whitley's subsequent stories about an ingenious circular hustle involving the insurance company and a small bank in

Washington acquired by California promoters. Both firms subsequently collapsed.

The goal of base-building may be defined simply as understanding the norms of the area under journalistic investigation. If you don't understand these norms, you won't have a story. You may write one and somehow get it published, but you will not have asked the right questions and your reader will not understand what you are trying to say. Moreover, your target will be able to shoot holes in your story. Indeed, he may be able to get other reputabile experts to do the shooting while he stands aside, looking righteously aggrieved.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

There are three major kinds to research activity, each of which will be discussed later in detail: records search, interviews, and observation. If you are not working solo, the comparing and contrasting of information gathered by others is also an essential activity. As a practical matter, you do not want to fragment these activities. Sources lead to records; records suggest interviews; interviews suggest other interviews, and so on. Comparing and contrasting becomes part of the daily routine. Every day, you (and your teammates if you have them) must sit down and record what you did that day.

Research Records

Written evidence of what the reporter sees, to whom he talks and what the person said, observations, and speculations are the seeds of investigative stories. They build a consolidated record that fertilizes the investigative imagination. As James B. Steele says: "The record provides an incredible amount of information." The records suggest, as no other method can, a pattern the investigator can follow. Write a separate memo about people you see, records you look at, observations you make. Every day. Unfailingly. Slavishly. And be sure that this information is properly filed and cross-indexed.

Interviews

Transcribe your interview notes in clear English. Keep direct, usable quotes completely separate from off-the-record material. At the beginning of the interview notes, write a brief statement of your own about the color and circumstances surrounding the interview: where it was, who else was

present, how the interviewee acted, one-sided telephone conversations you may have heard, questions that may not have been resolved in the interview. It may be two or three months before you write a story. Therefore, make your interview notes as lucid and as solid as possible so that when it's time to write them into a story, you and your teammates will be able to understand them.

Observations

Direct observation places the reporter at the action scene. He may watch from a distance, he may be an anonymous participant, he may play roles. All of these activities force the reporter to weigh and examine his ethical values.

Comparing and Contrasting

Finding the piece in the puzzle that doesn't fit, the extraneous fact in all of the collection of data, is what starts the investigator on the trail. Comparing and contrasting as the reporter sifts through the accumulation of records, he develops nerves closer to the surface than most people, an instinct for the telltale clue—the fact unlike in all the facts alike.

Gap-closing

If you are working alone, sit down at least once a week with the material and review it, bringing your chronology book up to date and deciding whether the new information points in a new direction or requires further checking. This procedure is gap-closing. Bill Lambert calls it "triangulating." It is the business of resolving conflicts among your different records, observations, and interview notes. Do the files from the building inspector's office agree with the architect's plans in the building-permit office? Is there a requisition in the purchasing office that agrees in every detail with the city council resolution? Do Joe Smith and Richard Roe have the same version of what Councilman Doe said when they had lunch? No? Then in each case, you have a gap.

Why does the gap exist? Could the building inspectors simply be slippish in their work? Are dated or serially numbered records incomplete or out of order? If so, you had better look up the supporting documents on this case in the city clerk's office. Or you had better talk to Councilman Jones, who knows both Joe Smith and Richard Roe and can help you evaluate the conflicts in their stories.

In these situations and in countless others, you may decide to recycle—to reinterview and recheck records until you have resolved any conflicts. In any event, no matter how many record searches, interviews, and observations you have to make and no matter how often you and your co-workers compare and contrast the information gathered, the gap must be closed.

REEVALUATION

The boss—your line editor—should be in on any reevaluation of the story's progress. The purpose of this step is to find out where you are with respect to minimum and maximum goals. You can expect one of several outcomes from a reevaluation of your story progress thus far:

- You are told to drop it. You are not getting anywhere.
- You are told to file it but keep watching for leaks, tips, or leads that may reactivate it.
- You are ready for key interviews to complete the minimum story.
- You have the minimum story in hand, and the maximum looks possible.
- You are ready for key interviews on the maximum story.

The last possible outcome is, of course, the most palatable. And if the green light to proceed further is given, you are ready for your most important interviews.

KEY INTERVIEWS

Key interviews are to be saved for the last. There may be only one, or there may be as many as half a dozen. However many, the reporter sets them up only after he is satisfied that he has isolated the central figures behind his central thesis.

Much of Chapter 4 is devoted to the complexities of the key interview. Here, however, let it be said that there are three important points to remember about it: you should prepare for it carefully; you should keep control of it, and you should use it to gain new information.

Preparation

Reread all of the files. Bring the chronology up to date. Check and recheck crucial documents. Study all of this material until you can talk about any aspect of it without fumbling. Write down the questions. Study them

and arrange them in a logical order, going from the most general and least difficult ones at the start to the toughest and most specific ones at the end. With the person who will accompany you on the key interview, go over the questions carefully and agree who will carry which lines of questioning.

Control/

In most cases, the interview becomes an intense contest of wills and wits. Proper planning and execution enables you to keep control of it.

New Information

Too many people think of the key interview only as the formality of letting the target person comment on or give excuses for the illegal or immoral activities that you have documented. But another, admittedly difficult, objective in conducting the interview is to get new information. If you have not planned the interview well, you will run into a stone wall of "no comments"—or suggestions like "get out of here," among others. These reactions may make the target person look bad, but they do little to enlighten your reader.

Don't shirk the key interview. The target person may not want to see you, but don't use this as an excuse to avoid the interview. If he won't answer the phone, go to his house. If he won't answer the door, send him a registered letter. If he won't accept the letter, get to him through his attorney, his employer, his business partner, his family, his party chairman. Not until you have tried all approaches can you conscientiously write, "Mr. Doe refused to comment."

FINAL EVALUATION AND FINAL DECISION

Even if you left the key interview with the happy feeling of having gotten all you needed, sit down in a quiet place with your interview partner and recheck the information gathered. Test each point against documents and files. One of you should be the devil's advocate and argue for other interpretations or further documentation. If the interview was taped, play it over, stopping and backing up at important points to be sure that the context is clear. Was your question clearly phrased? Was the answer directly to the point, or did the respondent leave himself an opening? If he gave an alibi, can it be checked?

At the end of this last evaluation comes a final go/no-go decision. If it's no-go, so be it. Discuss the negative decision with your editor, but do not talk yourself into a go decision just "because of all the work we have put into it."

"I spent weeks reading transcripts of court material and several thousand pages of transcripts and depositions," says Al Delugach, *The Los Angeles Times*. (The original tip was to have led to some hanky-panky in a national political campaign.)

"After talking to a number of people," he says. "I decided it was not the story that it was cracked up to be.... It didn't have the potential."

"Relatively few professionals describe investigative work in intellectual terms," says Dick Lyneis, *Riverside Press-Enterprise*. "They talk about digging, frustrations, finding blind alleys, obstinacy of sources. I say it in a little different way.... You have to develop such a tremendous self-discipline to deal with this frustration of finding blind alleys. You can go off and work your ass to the core pursuing this thing, and then you have to go back and tell an editor, 'I spent ten days, and I haven't got a goddamn thing for it.'"

WRITING AND PUBLICATION

If the decision is go, then the writing and the production of the story, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 7, are the last steps to be taken in the process of telling it to the reader. Most likely, the story is quite complex. Identify a main story theme so that the reader can understand it the first time through. Everything else—tables of numbers, technical explanations, question-and-answer transcriptions, comments of peripheral sources—should be put in sidebars or illustrated with photos and graphics—all brightly packaged and arranged for easy reference.

Write only what you know. Write with conservative accuracy. Editors want bright, strong, snappy leads. The editor who was so conservative at all the evaluation points may now want a strong, unequivocal lead to support a sweeping, accusatory headline. But firmly, as reasonably as possible, hold your ground and write only what the facts support.

You can write from the facts and still have a readable piece. Do not think automatically of a summary news lead. Think instead of introducing your subject with a sound, color-laden few paragraphs that speak to the reader in familiar language of problems he is concerned about. And promise to inform him. Not incidentally, it is often best to write the central part of the main story before you decide on the lead and the ending. If you

can put together a clear narrative, organized chronologically or in some other easily understandable manner the lead may suggest itself.

Checking and Production

Every good investigative story should have the best possible exposure. To accomplish that result requires cooperation and coordination among editors, lawyers, photographers, proofreaders, artists, the back shop, and anyone else involved in presenting the story. Once the key interviews are finished, you have effectively created a deadline: get the story published before the subject can tamper with records or witnesses or mount a counter-offensive. Nothing can be more frustrating than having publication delayed because others in your organization don't know what's coming or what they are supposed to do.

Publication of the story also involves the checking and rechecking of all story elements one more time. Your name and reputation, as well as the credibility of the paper, are at stake. Check the headlines to see that they reflect the sense of the story. Look at the photos to see that no one has cropped out an important element or emphasized the wrong element. Check the graphs to see that the artists have the correct numbers on the appropriate bars, that the wording of the legend is properly spelled. Read the cutlines. Read the galley proof and the page proof. Read the very first copy of the paper as it comes off the press.

Follow-up Plan

People go about following up on their published story in different ways, but all agree that the follow-up is necessary. If you are working alone, plan to get daily reactions from official agencies, from institutional leaders, from public spokesmen of all kinds, during the week after your story breaks. Keep asking the target spokesman for comments as follow-ups themselves develop into stories.

If your paper is like too many others, your follow-up will fade out in a week or two. And this may suit you. You may decide that you shouldn't do any more, that you have provided the best information you can, and that it has been absorbed into the public consciousness. If it takes months or years before the public decides to react, that is an acceptable circumstance so far as you are concerned.

You may, however, want to do something to prevent your story from fading out of the public consciousness. In that case, you might want to set up a program for six-month, one-year, and two-year follow-ups. These amount to mini-investigations and should be scheduled to start a couple of

weeks to a month before the actual anniversary. Or you might choose to work with appropriate legislative or congressional committee chairmen or staff members to get hearings scheduled. Clark Mollenhoff and Bill Lambert are among many strong believers in this approach. Others avoid it, saying that they do not want to be identified as advocates of a particular cause.

Still another way in which to keep your story alive is to proceed from investigation of a particular event or "deal" into investigation of the institutional machinery that is supposed to govern such things. If your paper is given to continuing series, this approach may become part of your operating plan. Or you might prefer to arrange to have someone else carry out the follow-up while you move on to fresh ground. Some say that this method should be standard practice in order to prevent the investigator from being labeled a hatchetman. *Newsday* introduces a follow-up reporter (quaintly called "the vulture") into the process as final writing of the series begins. He reads the whole file and develops a plan for a series of follow-ups. *Newsday's* promotion department also gets into the act, arranging special delivery of the investigative series to appropriate legislators, congressmen, the governor's mansion, the White House, or to any other official who has the power to correct the wrongs described.

There is an element of self-protection in planning the follow-up to any controversial story. "If you're doing a story about a prominent politician," says Bill Lambert, "you're going to get an enormous amount of backlash. He's going to try to figure out some way to destroy your story. I try to consider the possible lines of counterattack and figure out some way to counter them. That's one of the reasons that I don't believe in the idea of the purity and the total disassociation of the reporter from government.... There are instances where agencies of government can step in afterward and help bolster a story."

Lambert recalls a 1967 story he did about the ethical conflicts of a United States senator who headed a major committee. The senator counter-attacked, and the ethics committee supported him. After Lambert did a follow-up story citing failure of the ethics committee to pursue the evidence, the committee chairman invited him to outline steps the committee should take. Lambert did so, and the committee staff went to work. The question became moot shortly thereafter: the senator was defeated in a primary election.

There is no single way in which to do the investigative story. There is—or should be—no "typical" investigative story. Circumstances alter cases. The essence of investigative work is imagination and motivation. You can read the chart until you're cross-eyed, but nothing will happen until you apply creative thought to unexplained facts. Particularly if you are not

experienced, signs and patterns of irregularity may not leap out at you as they would at a veteran.

As an advanced college student or a young practicing journalist, you should not feel that your experience is too limited to attempt investigative reporting. It may well be a challenge to find a subject on which to begin investigative reporting, and initially you might feel overwhelmed by the prospect. But put your intellectual processes to work in asking how or where you should start. Perhaps you'll find that the way in which to start is by first caring about something around you that seems wrong and then developing a commitment to do something about it.

And a way in which to begin developing ideas is to start on significant but not sensational "depth" stories about local issues. "At least do the motherhood issues," says Bob Greene. "Crime on the streets, drug addiction among the young, this is the sort of stuff that you want to work on first. These are motherhood issues. You know that your advertisers will applaud...but at least you're starting to accomplish some good.... If you can get people used to that profile, then put your foot in. Put another step into the water and keep going. Go as far as you can."

DOING THE WORK
